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Darfur suffers no less just because we can't see

Wednesday, May 18, 2005

In certain areas of the world, events of even horrifying proportions seem to be all but invisible -- and African nations often lead the list.

Take Darfur. An estimated 300,000 inhabitants of this western region of Sudan have been killed over the past two years, and more than 1.8 million have been driven into camps in Darfur and across the border in Chad.

Nor is this story finished. Right now, the slaughter goes on. The world knows it and does not act. Sure, there's humanitarian aid. But that treats only the symptom, not the cause. Where is the outrage that would get troops into Sudan to end the genocide?

After the world learned the truth about the World War II Holocaust under Nazi Germany, it vowed "Never again."

Judging from subsequent genocides in Soviet territories, Cambodia, Bosnia and African nations that also include Rwanda, we either didn't mean that vow or don't know how to enforce it.

Sen. Jon Corzine (D-N.J.) and Rep. Donald Payne (D-10th Dist.) think a good start in this case would be for the administration to act on the Darfur Accountability Act, a bill sponsored in the Senate by Corzine and Sen. Sam Brownback (R-Kan.) and in the House by Payne.

The bill passed both houses of Congress in April, with broad bipartisan support, and since it's more about establishing U.S. attitude and commitment, the cost is comparatively modest. It lays out steps to help end the Darfur genocide and restore normal life to the hundreds of thousands of Muslim refugees, and it stipulates prosecution of the perpetrators. It also calls for strong sanctions against Sudan, the freezing of assets and denial of visas to those responsible for the crimes, the establishment of a military no-fly zone, increased assistance to the African Union peacekeepers and the appointment of a presidential envoy for Sudan.

Funding was to have been included in the Senate's mammoth supplemental appropriations measure that covered our military activities in Iraq and

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Afghanistan, money for the war on terrorism (specifically for hiring, training and equipping 500 additional Border Patrol agents) and an additional \$656 million for tsunami-related disaster relief.

Darfur refugees were to get \$90 million in relief aid.

Confident the bill would pass, Corzine took off on a fact-finding mission to Chad. While he was gone, the supplemental appropriations bill passed, but the Darfur Accountability Act had been removed.

Corzine says he hasn't gotten an explanation, although in "off- the-record conversations with senior State Department officials" he's been told that recent signs of cooperation by the Sudanese government had raised concerns about "some specifics they didn't want in the bill."

Corzine doesn't think such signs, even if sincere, are nearly enough. He finds it "ironic," he says, that "the president was speaking about the failure of Roosevelt in Yalta and turning his back on the same kinds of issues."

At the very least, says Corzine, his trip left no doubt the refugee problem is causing serious instability in Chad. "Chad is an arid, non- inviting environment; the farther north you go, the more desert-like it is," he says. "So you have more people using the water sources of an area already short on water. (Chad President Idriss) Deby wants to take a much more aggressive role in bringing this to a conclusion so these people can go home."

Equally crucial, he says, the longer people have to live under the harsh conditions of a camp, the greater the chance something will explode.

"If left there a long time, people get rebellious," he says. "This is sowing the seeds of terrorism."

Corzine and Payne spent the better part of last weekend in New Jersey's houses of worship trying to drum up the kind of public pressure that could force the administration to move forward on the terms of the Darfur Accountability Act. Deleting the Darfur provisions from the Senate's appropriations bill, Payne said, was "a grave mistake" and represented "a distressing disregard for the Holocaust's tragic lessons."

Still, it's an uphill fight, not only because of administration resistance but because it's so hard to interest the public in parts of the world about which we know so little. Face it, most Americans couldn't locate Sudan on a map, never mind understand its internal problems. It's not a significant part of any school curriculum.

But as 9/11 proved, what we don't know about what's happening in the rest of the world can hurt us.

"The reality of globalization in the 21st century and its impact on every person's life is enormous," Corzine says. "To have our children unexposed to the great religions, to the geographical interconnections of our society, to the threats that exist because of globalization -- HIV-AIDS is a perfect example -- is to sell our kids short."

And standing on the sidelines while hundreds of thousands of people die sells humanity short.

Fran Wood is a Star-Ledger columnist.

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